DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 142 JC 800 571

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TITLE Correlates of Classroom Retention.
INSTITUTION American River Junior Coll., Sacramento, Calif.
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 21p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Persistence: Assignments: Community Colleges: Dropout Research: *Dropouts: Grading: Influences: *Predictor Variables: School Surveys: Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance: Student Teacher Relationship: Teacher Attitudes: Teaching Methods: Teaching Styles: Two Year Colleges: *Withdrawal (Education)

ABSTRACT

Interviews with the day teaching faculty at American River College were conducted to determine which variables most affect class withdrawal and retention rates. During the interviews, each instructor was asked to think of any one of his/her day classes taught during the preceding semester and to answer 30 questions concerning, among other items, teaching methods and materials utilized, grading practices, the number of units awarded for successful course completion, and the time and day the course was offered. Responses to each of the 30 questions were correlated statistically with the proportion of enrolled students in each class who actually earned credit at the end of the semester. Study results, based on interviews with 189 faculty members, indicate that the mean proportion of students earning credit in the 189 courses was 64%, and that seven of the 30 interview items yielded significant correlations with completion rates. These variables were the percent of students receiving A's or B's: frequent student evaluations of the instructor: the existence of course prerequisites: volunteer work as part of the class assignments: the extent to which teachers and students interacted socially beyond class time: the frequent use of support media: and the use of prepared notes during lectures. The study report analyzes findings for each of the interview items. (JP)

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# CORRELATES OF CLASSROOM RETENTION

by

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American River College

May 1980

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## BACKGROUND

Undoubtedly, there are many variables affecting class drops and retention rates. These can be categorized into four broad areas:

1. Student variables. Characteristics of students include general ability, specific skill competencies, motivational and personality factors, and limits of time availability for school-related demands.
2. Faculty variables. Variables that the instructor has primary responsibility for include method of information delivery, assessment and grading, teaching style, and specific objectives for students taking the course.
3. Course/Context variables. Examples include the subject matter of the course, how often it meets per week, how many units are given, and the time and day the course is offered.
4. Other unidentified variables. This category could include problems at home, moving away, illness, economic factors and a host of unknown variables that could affect retention.

Recently, a student survey was taken at American River College to explore the reasons why students drop classes. The results of that survey along with specific recommendations are available from the Research Office or through the ERIC computer bank system.[1] Having determined what students perceive about

[1] Rasor, R. A. Why Students Drop Classes and Withdraw From American River College. March 1980.

courses and instructors as it relates to class drops, the next logical step was to ask faculty some specific questions about classroom procedures. Their answers could then be correlated with a measure of student retention for each instructor. This study followed that line of inquiry. Hopefully, another study will examine the characteristics of students who drop class compared with those who stay.

## METHOD

The method decided upon was to interview the faculty with a structured questionnaire. This allowed exchange of ideas, follow-up questions when needed, and probably yielded a higher rate of return than would have been the case had the questionnaires been sent through the mail. It also gave students valuable experience in questionnaire construction, interviewing, data collection, and tabulation.

### The Subjects:

The entire day teaching faculty listed in the 1979-80 ARC catalog (N=270) were the target population. Certificated personnel doing other than full-time teaching were not included. The 22 students enrolled in psychology 4 (Research Methods in Psychology) made up the interviewing team. Thus, each student was assigned to interview approximately 12 faculty members. The assignment of instructor names to student interviewers was done randomly. Of the 270 faculty members, 12 were too busy or did not wish to participate, 34 could not be located (not in, on leave, transferred) or did not teach the previous semester. Ancther 10 instructors were not interviewed because students simply did not get to them during the time period for data collection. The net number of 214 interviews represents a 79% sample.

It was felt that the questionnaire was not appropiate for instructors interviewed in Nursing or Physical Education, so data from these departments were analyzed separately and given separate reports. This report is based upon 189 faculty interviews (70% of total day teaching faculty).

The Questionnaire:

Items were generated after much brainstorming with students. We wanted quantitative demographics for both course and instructor which would allow for change if ultimately recommended. For this reason, variables like sex, age or years in teaching were not included. Items covered course/context variables like number of units, whether a prerequisite was a requirement, to instructor-related items like "how much homework is expected by an "A" student?" There were a total of 30 structured items and one open-ended question on how instructors might reduce class drops if that were a goal.

The Criterion or Dependent Variable :

The class withdrawal rate (grade W) was considered unsatisfactory. First, it represents a negative focus rather than a positive one. Second, from the student drop survey we know that many students don't officially drop even though they stop attending. These disappearing people usually get "NC's" or "F's" for a final grade. So a realistic number of people dropping a class really is represented by all the "W's" and some of the NC's" and "F's".

A more workable statistic is what we call passing grade rate or PGR. The formula is given below:

$$PGR = \frac{\text{number of A+B+C+D+Credit grades}}{\text{4th week census, beginning enrollment}}$$

The complement is:

$$1 - PGR = \frac{\text{number of I+W+NC+WNC+F grades}}{\text{4th week census, beginning enrollment}}$$

Thus, PGR is the proportion of students out of the beginning enrollment who earn units at the end of the semester period.

Naturally, this is not a perfect criterion either. Some students do stay in class and earn "F's" or "NC's". Also, some "I's"turn into passing grades, and beginning enrollment may be higher than it should be if an instructor did not turn in a no-show list. Furthermore, one would be hard pressed in attempting to prove that PGR is the best measure of "quality" teaching. Still, PGR has merit if we believe that successful completion of programs has merit. This study looked at both "W" rate and PGR but did detailed analysis using PGR as the criterion variable. Also, PGR and "W" rate correlate -.70 (-1.00 would be a perfect correlation).

Procedure:

Student interviewers visited faculty during office hours and collected data on the 31 questions. Each instructor was asked to think of any one of his/her day classes last semester as the "target class". This procedure was necessary in order to have the items on the questionnaire specific to one class. Also, this builds in a certain randomness as to selection of classes. The PGR was then determined for each instructor for the specific class upon which the interview was based. All data with the exception of an open-ended question were coded and computer analyzed at University of California, Davis. Frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, variation, correlation, multiple correlation, and appropriate comparison tests between extreme PGR groups were made.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The complete questionnaire with appropriate frequency data, percentages and selected means, ranges and standard deviations for all 189 respondents appears as Table 1. Generally the item choices generated enough range of responses for determining whether individual differences were related to PGR. Exceptions to this were items 10 (there were few team taught classes in the sample), item 24 (many instructors interviewed did not like the content or wording of this item), and item 29 (not many instructors use community volunteer work as part of course work).

The mean PGR for the 189 classes was .64 or 64 percent with a range of 14-100% and a standard deviation of 15%. The mean value is close to the school wide average of 61.5% based upon 41,879 grades given for the Fall 1979 semester. Broken down, this means that of 41,879 grades, some 25,769 earned units and 16,110 did not (38.5%). It is reasonable to assume that the sample classes selected by the faculty represents a cross section that reflects the total population, at least as far as PGR is concerned.

In Table 2 appears the correlational contribution of certain items toward explaining variation of PGR "scores". In other words, item 17 (percent of "A's" & "B's") correlates with PGR .227. Squaring this value (.227 x .227 = .051) gives the proportion of variance accounted for. Thus with just item 17, we know about 5% of what we need to know to make a perfect correlation or perfect prediction of PGR. Adding the results of item 11 in Table 2 raises the variance accounted for to about 9%. It keeps building this way until all items are added in the formula. Note that with all information from the questionnaire we can still only account for about 27% of the variation of PGR scores. If we know 27%, we don't know 73%. This would be called unexplained variance. Perhaps data on student characteristics would substantially raise our predictive skill.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCIES, AVERAGES, RANGES, AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS
FOR ITEMS FROM:
CLASS DROP QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FACULTY

Faculty Name_____
Course_____
Time_____
Days_____

1. Is this course officially designated: %
   - A. Lecture only 119 (63)
   - B. Lecture and lab 68 (36)
   - C. Lab only 2 ( 1)

2. What is the departmental designation for this course?
   (enter whole number) _____

3. What is the official maximum number of students for this course?
   (enter whole number) Mean = 46.7 Range = 12-400 SD = 47.0

4. What time did the class meet?
   (enter nearest whole number,eg., 8:30=8; 9:45=10;also,1:00=13; 2:00--14) (also pick time that class met most often (days-not hrs) if a variable schedule.

| | N | | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| 7 a.m. = | 2 | 11 a.m. = | 36 |
| 8 = | 43 | 12 = | 20 |
| 9 = | 35 | 1 p.m. = | 21 |
| 10 = | 26 | 2 = | 3 |

5. How many units was this class?
   (enter whole number; ½=1) Mean = 3.2 Range = 1-7 SD = .8

6. How many grand total class hours per week did the class meet?
   (include lab time; enter whole number) Mean = 4.1 Range = 2-15 SD = 1.9

7. Does the class have a prerequisite or other selective factor for admission?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 88 | (47) |
| No | 100 | (53) |

8. How many days per week did the class meet (or typically, how many days in a week should a student have been in attendance ? (eg.,2 hrs.lect.+1 hr. lab=3; if self-pace, get typical number of days.
   (enter whole number) Mean = 3.0 Range = 1-5 SD = 1.0

9. Using a 50-minute period as one academic hour, what is the longest stretch of time within a week that the class meets? (eg,2 hr. lecture, 3 hrs. lab=3; do not include performance data like sports events, concerts, plays. (longest and continous block of time on one day)
   (enter whole number) Mean = 1.67 Range = 1-8 SD = 1.1

10. Is this course team taught by more than one instructor for the lecture or more than one instructor for the lab? (Do not include as team one instructor for lecture and another instructor for lab)

| | | % |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 13 | ( 7) |
| No | 176 | (93) |

11. Regardless of the course number, is this class designated mainly for occupationally oriented two-year programs, transfer to four-year college, or about equal?

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| A. | Two-year occupational | 33 | (18) |
| B. | About equal | 58 | (30) |
| C. | Transfer | 98 | (52) |

12. Altogether, what was the approximate cost in dollars for all the books and materials required for this course? (equipment, fees, field trip costs) ($0-4.99=1); ($5-9.99=2); ($10-14.99=3); ($15-19.99=4); ($20-24.99=5); ($25-29.99=6); ($30-34.99=7); ($35-39.99=8); ($40-44.99=9); ($45-49.99=10); ($50 or higher=11)

Median = $15.93 Range = 0-$50+

13. In evaluating students for purpose of giving final grades, how many required classroom achievement tests did you give in this class? (include short quizzes as well)

(enter whole number) Mean = 9.6 Range = 0-39 SD = 8.3

14. Approximately, how many total pages from all reading materials were required reading (for highest grade if variable)? (0-199=1); (200-399=2); (400-599=3); (600-799=4); (800-999=5) (1000-1199=6); (1200-1399=7); (1400-1599=8); (1600 or more=9)

(enter code not pages) Median = 386 Range = 0-1600+

15. Overall, about how often did you take roll (call) in this class?

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| A. | Close to everytime | 102 | (54) |
| B. | About every other time | 7 | ( 4) |
| C. | About every third time | 13 | ( 7) |
| D. | A few times during semes. | 30 | (16) |
| E. | Hardly ever or never | 37 | (20) |

16. How many hours of homework in a week is reasonably expected by an "A" or top student in this class?

(enter whole number of hours Mean = 6.0 Range = 0-30 SD = 3.9

17. About what percent of your students get "A's" and "B's" in this course?

(enter nearest whole percentage for "A" &"B" grades) Mean = 45.7 Range = 2-100 SD = 22.0

(enter percent receiving credit in a credit/no credit only class) ___

18. How much total time did you spend discussing study habits for this class? (How many minutes?) (Do not include test preps.) (Min.= hrs.x50)
(enter minutes) Mean = 89.0 Range = 0-540 SD= 108.3

19. About how often do you use support services or sources like films, other audio/visual aids, guest speakers etc.? %

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. Nearly every time | 21 | (11) |
| B. About 3/4 of the time | 9 | ( 5) |
| C. About 1/2 of the time | 14 | ( 7) |
| D. About 1/4 of the time | 56 | (30) |
| E. About none of the time | 89 | (47) |

20. Which best describes your procedure with notes in class lecture?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. I have detailed notes and refer to them often during lecture | 12 | ( 6) |
| B. I have detailed notes and refer to them once in awhile during lecture. | 53 | (28) |
| C. I lecture from an outline. | 72 | (38) |
| D. Little or no notes or don't lecture | 52 | (28) |

21. The designation "3 hours lecture or 1 hour lab" really can include diverse activities such as film showing, discussion, demonstrations, as well as formal lecture. In a typical week what amount of the lecture designated portion of this class did you spend giving lecture?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. All or nearly all the time | 62 | (33) |
| B. About 3/4 of the time | 43 | (23) |
| C. About 1/2 of the time | 49 | (26) |
| D. About 1/4 of the time | 29 | (15) |
| E. No lecture or none of the time | 5 | ( 3) |

22. Which best describes your preparation of students for a major test on class material?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. They are given specific objectives that will be tested upon | 67 | (36) |
| B. They are given an overview of the kinds of questions I will ask and may include some sample questions | 85 | (46) |
| C. They are told to study everything (or close to everything) in the chapters or materials | 32 | (17) |

23. How often do you ask for and receive "formal" student evaluations in this course:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. Never or hardly ever | 44 | (39) |
| B. About once every two years | 38 | (17) |
| C. About once every year | 32 | (20) |
| D. About every semester | 74 | (23) |

24. In motivating students to do well in class which practice do you think works best?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. Dangle the good grade "carrot" as an incentive | 54 | (29) |
| B. Threaten with the bad grade "stick" as an incentive | 2 | ( 1) |
| C. Not sure, neither or about equal | 132 | (70) |

25. Which of the following grades would you typically give to students who remain in class, attend regularly, but do not approximate even a "D" grade at the end of the semester:

| | | % |
|---|---|---|
| A. W-Withdrawal(now permissable) | 16 | ( 9) |
| B. NC,no credit or WNC | 110 | (62) |
| C. F or WF-failing | 52 | (29) |

26. Which grade do you typically give students still on the roster at the end of the semester but who stopped attending for a long period of time:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. W-withdrawal | 24 | (13) |
| B. NC, no credit or WNC | 90 | (48) |
| C. F. or WF-failing | 74 | (39) |

27. Is it your usual practice to drop non-attending students before the deadline to drop?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 119 | (63) |
| No | 70 | (37) |

28. In this class, was a term paper or equivalent written project involving reading and researching other materials required of any students? (10 pages +=one major test)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. Required from everyone | 53 | (28) |
| B. Required for "A" or "B" gr. | 9 | ( 5) |
| C. Optional for extra points | 9 | ( 5) |
| D. Not required(not an option) | 118 | (62) |

29. Was volunteer work (or community services) outside the classroom required?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. Required from everyone | 8 | ( 4) |
| B. Required for "A"or "B" gr. | 2 | ( 1) |
| C. Optional for extra points | 10 | ( 5) |
| D. Not required(not an option) | 169 | (89) |

30. Some instructors make it a practice of encouraging students to talk with them or become more socially involved with them beyond the classroom time. Evidence of this could include: having a class party, giving out instructor's home phone, inviting students to the instructor's home, or asking students to drop into their offices on a casual basis just to talk. You may deem this practice as desirable, undesirable, practical or impractical. The question is, to what extent are you socially involved with students beyond class time and posted office hours?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. A great deal | 14 | ( 7) |
| B. Quite a bit | 28 | (15) |
| C. Occasionally | 49 | (26) |
| D. Very little | 57 | (30) |
| E. None | 40 | (21) |

31. If reducing class drops were an institutional goal as well as a personal goal, what thing do you believe individual teachers could reasonably do to bring that about? (re-ask question if respondent says tuition or something beyond control of instructor) (Write answer on back)

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF MULTIPLE REGRESSION*

| # | Variable | Cumulative Multiple Correlation (R) | % Variance Accounted For (Cumulative $R^2$) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | Percent get A's & B's | .227 | .051 |
| 11 | Orientation toward transfer | .296 | .088 |
| 30 | Faculty socializing with students | .359 | .129 |
| 20 | Using detailed notes | .380 | .144 |
| 7 | Course has selective admission | .399 | .159 |
| 5 | Course units (fewer) | .419 | .176 |
| 19 | Use of support media (films) | .436 | .190 |
| 23 | Frequency of student evaluations of instructors | .444 | .197 |
| | | ... | ... |
| | | ... | ... |
| | | ... | ... |
| | | ... | ... |
| | | ... | ... |
| | All other variables added (N=19) | .519 | .269 |

* Criterion variable is passing grade rate (number of A + B + C + D + Credit grades divided by beginning enrollment.)

Appearing in Table 3 are items which significantly correlated with PGR. While statistically significant, the values are small and account for even a smaller portion of the variance. Also in Table 3 are comparisons between the bottom 25% of PGR scores (range 14-55%) against the top 25% of PGR scores (range 75-100%). There are three significant differences between the high and low groups. However, one deals with volunteer work and mention was already made about the limited range of numbers for that item. The other two differences suggest that instructors with high PGR give a higher percentage of "A" and "B" grades as well as receive student evaluations of their performance more frequently than instructors with low PGR. One cannot automatically infer a causal relationship. Receiving frequent student evaluations may or may not cause high PGR. But high PGR goes with frequent evaluations. At least we can say that instructors who have a high PGR ask for and receive student evaluations more often and give more "A" and "B" grades than do low PGR instructors. Other high versus low PGR comparisons are in the expected direction but do not reach statistical significance.

Mention should be made of negative results, that is, those items which appear not to correlate with PGR. These appear in Table 4. There were some surprises. For example, frequent attendance taking showed no relationship to PGR in this study. Contrary to popular belief, whether a term paper was required or not showed no relationship to either drop rate or PGR. The items in Table 4 may represent good teaching practices, but modification of them is not likely to have a dramatic effect upon PGR.

The data analysis was refined to include only lecture - 3 unit classes. Naturally some values went up a little and some down by the same amount. Most noticeable of the changes was item 6 which asked, "How many hours per week did the class meet?" All classes which met for longer hours than a standard 3 unit course became a predictor of lower PGR (20% of variance). Certain 9-week classes

and math classes requiring 5 or 6 hours of attendance while giving 3 units, appear to have lower retention. The critical factor may not be the hours. Rather, the nature of the course and who takes it may be more relevant. Certainly, more study on this variable is warranted.

In Table 5 are given the various positive instructor suggestions to the question on how individual faculty members might reduce class drops. The most common response was "more personal counseling by teachers" followed by "providing clear objectives" and "more positive encouragement given to students." In the table are many helpful recommendations. There were also a few comments (not in the table) which reflected the thinking that class drops are of no concern to faculty, nor should they be.

A comparison was made between the findings of this study and those of the student drop survey. These are found in Table 6.

The substance of this study suggests that some socializing with students, receiving feedback from them regarding classroom procedures, and giving a liberal amount of "A" and "B" grades are important variables in affecting retention. Undoubtedly, there are many more.

TABLE 3
SIGNIFICANT ITEMS WITH CRITERION AND COMPARISON GROUP DATA

| # | Variable | Correlation N = 189 | High Group % N=49 | Low Group % N=49 | Statistical Test[1] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | Percent get A's & B's | .21 *** | 51.8 | 38.7 | $t$=3.16*** |
| 23 | Frequent student evaluations of instructors | .15 ** | 69.4 | 44.9 | $\chi^2$=11.66*** |
| 7 | Course has selective Adm. | .15 ** | 51.0 | 38.8 | NS |
| 29 | Volunteer work part of class | .14 ** | 14.3 | 4.1 | $\chi^2$= 3.18* |
| 30 | Frequent socializing with students | .13 ** | 28.5 | 16.7 | NS |
| 19 | Frequent use of support media | .11 * | 28.6 | 16.3 | NS |
| 20 | Uses detailed notes | .11 * | 28.6 | 24.5 | NS |

[1] Statistical analysis is based upon all data. Only partial data are shown for high and low groups in this table.

* P< .10; ** P< .05; *** P< .01

TABLE 4
LIST OF ITEMS WHICH SHOWED NO SIGNIFICANT
RELATIONSHIP TO PASSING GRADE RATE (PGR) N=189

| # | Variable |
|---|---|
| 3 | Maximum number of students in course |
| 4 | Time class meets (however, only 3 courses at 2:00 p.m. or later in sample) |
| 5 | Class units |
| 6 | Grand total class hours per week |
| 8 | Number of days within a week that class meets |
| 9 | Longest stretch of time class lasts on one day (includes lab time) |
| 10 | Whether course is team taught or not (only 7% of sample was team) |
| 12 | Cost of course to student |
| 13 | Number of tests given students |
| 14 | Number of pages required from all reading materials |
| 15 | How often attendance checks are taken |
| 16 | Number of hours of homework by "A" or top student |
| 18 | Total time spent discussing student habits |
| 21 | Time spent actually lecturing during lecture portion of class |
| 22 | Degree of informing students about actual content of tests (specific objectives vs study everything) |
| 24 | Philosophy regarding use of "good" grades as incentives |
| 25 | Grade given to lower than "D" student (W,NC or F) |
| 26 | Grade given to non-attending student on roster (W,NC, or F) |
| 27 | Whether instructor drops non-attending students before deadline |
| 28 | Whether a term paper was a part of class requirements |

TABLE 5
CATEGORIES OF RESPONSES GIVEN BY FACULTY ON HOW THEY MIGHT IMPROVE RETENTION IF IT WERE AN INSTITUTIONAL GOAL

| | Number of times mentioned |
|---|---|
| More personal counseling by teachers | 26 |
| Provide class with clear objectives of the course | 14 |
| More positive encouragement (reinforcement) given to students | 13 |
| Prerequisites more strongly enforced | 12 |
| Make courses more interesting and relevant | 10 |
| Provide extra help | 8 |
| Teacher contact non-attending students | 7 |
| Better counseling | 7 |
| Encourage regular attendance | 7 |
| Motivate students | 6 |
| Charge a fee for class | 5 |
| Teach to student needs | 5 |
| Provide students with more information about instructor and course | 5 |
| Better communication between students and teachers | 4 |
| Prescreening of students | 4 |
| Standardize requirements (within a course) | 4 |
| Give classes on how to study (note:we do,psych 52) | 4 |
| Be more enthusiastic in class | 4 |
| Lower requirements for grading and class assignments — make courses easier | 4 |

TABLE 5 (Continued)

| | Number of Times mentioned |
|---|---|
| Instructor better organized and prepared | 3 |
| More frequent tests | 3 |
| Require necessary reading and writing skills before entry | 3 |
| More flexibility in grading | 2 |
| Change attitude of faculty toward meeting students' expectations | 2 |
| Smaller class size | 2 |
| Quicker return of grades | 2 |
| Avoid punitive grading | 1 |
| Transfer some to non-transferable courses | 1 |
| Student evaluation | 1 |
| Encourage students to enter programs where they will succeed | 1 |
| Keep costs of materials low | 1 |
| Instructors be present at registrations | 1 |
| Individual counseling during enrollment | 1 |
| Allow for shifts if schedule conflict | 1 |
| Mix your media | 1 |
| Have outside speakers | 1 |
| Stop threatening students | 1 |
| Be available to students during office hours | 1 |

TABLE 6
AREAS OF SUPPORT (AND NON-SUPPORT) BETWEEN THE MAIN
RESULTS OF STUDENT DROP STUDY AND THE FACULTY INTERVIEW

Areas of Support

| Student Responses (Day only) | Faculty Interview Findings |
|---|---|
| Dissatisfied with grade | PRG (retention) is positively correlated with percent of "A's" + "B's" given. |
| Course tests too difficult | |
| Grading practice unfair | |
| Course content too difficult | |
| (Recommended that instructors reexamine the difficulty level of their courses and consider the merits of non-competitive grading contracts) | |
| Instructor's presentation boring or disorganized (Recommended frequent student feedback about lectures, pace and organization) | Frequency of student evaluation correlated with PGR. |
| Instructor impersonal or unfriendly (Recommended workshops to personalize the educational process) | Degree of faculty socializing with students correlated with PGR. |

TABLE 6 (Continued)

Areas of Non-Support

| Student Responses (Day only) | Faculty Interview Findings |
|---|---|
| Too much homework | Number of homework hours expected by top students not correlated with PGR |
| Got too far behind (recommended more frequent tests) | Number of tests given not correlated with PGR. |

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